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AUTHOR Tinto, Vincent
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ABSTRACT

An overview is provided of the problem of student attrition and the essential components of effective retention programs. Following introductory arguments that the secret of retention is in the development of communities committed to education rather than retention, the paper discusses several major causes of student attrition, including academic difficulty, problems in adjusting to college life, lack of clearly defined goals, uncertainty about career aspirations, and unwillingness to make academic commitments. Special attention is paid to the relationship between persistence and experiences that tend to integrate the individual into the college community, the incongruence between what the individual needs and the college provides, and student isolation. The next section underscores the need for institutional assessment as a beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program. Next, features of effective retention programs are identified, including: (1) an emphasis on the communal nature of college life; (2) a commitment to students; (3) a commitment to education; and (4) clarity of educational mission. The final sections consider limitations on institutional action and issues related to resource allocation. (AJL)

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# THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE RETENTION

Vincent Tinto
Professor of Sociology and Education
School of Education
Syracuse University

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Prepared for presentation at the Maryland College Personnel Association Fall Conference, November 20, 1987, Prince George's Community College, Largo, MD.

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# THE PRINCIPLES OF EFFECTIVE RETENTION

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## INTRODUCTION

I have been asked to speak to you today about student retention, specifically about the sorts of actions colleges can take to retain more of their students. Rather than concern myself solely with the specifics of successful retention programs, I will focus on the commonalities of actions which underlie differing forms of effective retention efforts. Successful programs, however varied in structure, invariably share a number of important similarities not only in how they go about the task of retaining students but also in how they think of the ends to which retention actions should be directed. It is to these commonalities of action and thought, or what I will refer to here as the principles of effective retention, that I will direct my comments.

I will argue, much to the chagrin of the growing army of highly paid retention consultants, that there is no great secret to effective retention programs, no complex marketing or "quick fix" enrollment planning strategy that must be referred to for the key to successful retention. On the contrary, the secret to successful retention lies, has it always has, in the very foundations of the higher educational enterprise rightly understood, namely that it is at its core an enterprise committed to the education of all its student, faculty, and staff members.

I will argue that effective retention programs follow sound education, that the secret of effective retention, if there is one, lies in the development of effective educational communities which seek to involve all students in their social and intellectual life and which are committed to the education of students, not their mere retention. I will argue, in other words, that effective retention is possible only when retention per se is no longer the goal of retention programs.

To speak to the principles of effective retention, however, I must first address two separate, but related, issues, namely the complexity of student attrition and the need for retention assessment in the development of effective retention programs.

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Prepared for presentation at the Maryland College Personnel Association Fall Conference, November 20, 1987, Prince George Community College, Largo, Maryland.

## FORMS OF STUDENT DEPARTURE

As to the character of student attrition, there is no one form of behavior, no prevailing type of leaving which best characterizes the phenomena researchers mistakeningly label as student dropout. Student departure takes a variety of forms and arises from a diversity of sources, individual and institutional. The variation in causes of departure is, in a very real sense, as varied as the institutional settings from which it arises. Nevertheless, in the midst of this complexity it is possible to identify a number of major causes of student withdrawal from institutions of higher education.

### Academic Difficulty

One of these, that which is most talked about today, can be described by the term academic difficulty. Simply put, some students leave because they are unable or unwilling to meet the minimum academic standards of the institution. They frequently leave because they are forced to leave or soon expect to be. Understandably most of these leavings arise because of insufficient academic skills, not the least of which have to do with inadequate prior preparation and the development of poor study habits.

But though the incidence of academic dismissal is increasing, and on some campuses now makes up a large proportion of all student leavers, it still represents but a small proportion, or only twenty percent, of all dropouts nationally. Despite recent reports of the deterioration of academic skills among college students, it remains the case that most departures arise voluntarily in that they occur despite the maintenance of sufficient levels of grade performance. They result not from poor academic skills, but from other events which mirror the social and intellectual character of higher educational life.

Among this category of leaving, that is voluntary withdrawal, there appears to be six distinct causes of departure. These can be described by the terms adjustment, goals, commitments, uncertainty, congruence, and isolation.

### Adjustment

Some departures, primarily those which arise very early in the student career, result from the person's inability to make the adjustment to the academic and social life of the college. Even the most able or

socially mature can experience problems in making the jump from high school or work to the demands of college. For most, these difficulties are transitory. For others, the transition may be quite difficult, severe enough to lead to early withdrawal from college, often in the first six weeks of the first semester.

Some individuals enter college insufficiently prepared for the scale of the academic and social change required of them. Others come from backgrounds and/or situations which differ markedly from those of most students, faculty, and staff on campus (e.g. disadvantaged students). The scope of the adjustment they are required to make often overwhelms them. Yet others do not possess the coping skills which enable them to deal with new situations easily. As distinguished from persons who successfully make the transition to college, they appear unable to make positive steps toward problem resolution. Without assistance, they leave not because they are unable to meet the demands of college, but because they have been unable to cope with the problems of making the transition to college. They leave without giving themselves a chance to succeed.

Goals

But not all early departures are the result of the inability of persons to adjust to college. Some reflect the character of individual goals and the extent of individual commitments to the goal of college completion. Not all persons enter college with clearly held goals or with goals which are either coterminous with degree completion or compatible with the educational goals of the institution into which first entry is made.

Some individuals enter colleges with goals which are either more limited than or more extensive than those of the institution. Among the former, it is evident that many persons enter colleges for quite limited purposes and intend to leave prior to degree completion. Rather than representing some failure of purpose, their departure reflects their having successfully completed their program of study. Among the latter, it is often the case that persons enter colleges with the often unstated intention of leaving prior to degree completion in order to transfer to another institution. In both two and four-year colleges, but particularly in the former, entry to one institution is seen as a necessary temporary step toward eventual goal completion.

Whatever the character of initial intentions, some students will alter their goals during the course of their college careers. For some this change will reflect the natural process of maturation that occurs among maturing youth. For others it will also mirror the impact the college experience has on individual judgments and preferences. In either instance, change in individual goals may lead students to leave even when the character of their prior experiences has been

satisfactory.

Uncertainty

All this assumes, of course, that students enter colleges with clearly defined goals. In fact this is not the case. Many students begin their college careers with only the vaguest notions of why they have done so. That they have yet to clearly formulate their educational and career goals is in itself not a problem. Some degree of uncertainty is typical of most student careers. Difficulties arise, however, when individual goals go unresolved over long periods of time. This is the case because lack of goal clarity serves to undermine the willingness of students to meet the demands of college life and enhances the likelihood that individuals will, when stressed, leave rather than persist.

Commitments

Goal considerations aside, the completion of a college degree requires a considerable amount of effort and therefore commitment to the goal of college completion. Not all students possess that commitment. Their leaving, whether forced or voluntary, mirrors more their unwillingness to expend the effort required to attain the goal of college completion than it does lack of ability to do so.

But as in the case of goals, individual commitments will also change during the course of the student career. And like goals, those changes will necessarily mirror the character of individual experiences in college after entry. In this regard one of the clearest outcomes of research on student departure is the finding that individual experiences within the college after entry are more important to persistence and departure than what has gone on before entry. Though personality attributes and prior experience matter, they have less to do with departure, given entry, than do the quality of individual academic and social experiences within the college with other members of the institution, faculty, staff and student.

## Integration and Community Membership

The concepts of integration and community membership appear to best describe how those experiences impact upon student persistence. Experiences, academic and social, which serve to integrate the individual into the life of the college, also serve to heighten attachments and therefore strengthen individual commitments both to the goal of education and to the institution. Conversely the lack of integration and the absence of membership serves to undermine commitments and thereby heighten the likelihood of departure.

In the academic and social life of college, lack of integration takes on two distinct forms which may apply either to the academic realm and/or to the social realm of college life. It may be seen in the incongruency of the individual with the social and/or intellectual life of the institution. That is it may result from a significant mismatch between the needs and interests of the individual and those of the institution. Lack of integration may also be reflective of the isolation of the individual from the life of the institution. Rather than being the outcome of a mismatch of needs and interests, incongruency of this form mirrors the absence of significant contact between the individual and other members of the institution. Though congruency may be possible, the individual is unable to become integrated because he or she is unable to establish personal bonds with other members of the institution.

### Incongruence

Incongruency is largely the outcome of the quality of interaction between the individual and other members of the institution. It reflects the person's evaluation of the manner and degree to which the social and intellectual life of the institution serves his or her interests and needs. Departure in this case frequently leads the individual to transfer to another institution deemed more suited to his or her needs and interests. Here the terms mis-match and/or irrelevancy are often used to describe the ways in which students perceive their incongruence.

Another form of incongruence, one that is of concern to all institutions, is that which arises when individuals find the intellectual demands of the institution insufficiently stimulating. They leave not only because they are out of place but also because they are bored. It is perhaps telling of the state of higher education that such individuals are frequently more able and more concerned about the quality of education than is the average persistor on campus. Not surprisingly, such leavers most frequently understand their actions, not as a form of failure as is implied in the term dropout, but as a positive step toward

goal fulfillment.

### Isolation

Unlike incongruence, isolation is largely the outcome of lack of interaction between the person and other members of the institution. Departure arises not because of a mismatch but from the absence of significant social and/or intellectual contact. Most typically, leavers of this type express a sense of not having made contact or having established membership in the life of the institution. Rather than feeling at odds with the communities of the college, they express a sense of separation from the life of those communities.

## THE NEED FOR INSTITUTIONAL ASSESSMENT

The complexity of student departure, which we have only touched upon here, is further compounded by the understandable fact that the specific forms and roots of student leaving necessarily reflect the specific institutional context in which it occurs. Though departure from different institutions may share a number of important functional similarities, the specific individual and institutional roots of departure will necessarily differ. While institutions can and should learn from one another's experience, it remains the case that each institution must assess for itself the particular attributes of student departure from its campus. Only in that manner can institutions identify and accurately target specific forms of actions to the task of student retention. Institutional assessment is, in this fashion, a necessary beginning step in the formulation of an effective retention program.

Three observations should be made about the need for institutional assessments of student departure. First, despite claims to the contrary, effective institutional assessment of student retention is within the reach of virtually all institutions of higher education. Though it does require some skill and not an inconsiderable amount of effort to carry out such assessments, the mechanisms for student assessment are readily available to most institutions of higher education. Second, assessments of student retention can be gainfully employed in the development of institutional early warning systems. Such systems serve to identify "high-risk" students who are more likely to experience difficulty in completing their degree programs than are most other students. When linked to other institutional services, the identification of "high-risk" enables institutions to target services to those persons before "high risk" turns into high rates of departure. In this fashion institutional assessment of student retention can and does serve as an integral part of an effective retention program. Third, ongoing student assessment

systems can also be utilized for the purposes of program evaluation. The information they provide can be used as part of a broader program to assess the operation of the institution and its various subparts.

## THE ESSENTIAL FEATURES OF EFFECTIVE RETENTION PROGRAMS

Given such an assessment, the question remains as to what institutions can do to retain more of their students until degree completion. Here the growing body of research on student retention and on program effectiveness provides us with information as to the essential features of successful retention programs. Though programs on different campuses will vary somewhat in their structure and in the specific sorts of actions they take on behalf of students, successful programs are invariably similar in a number of important ways, specifically in the way they think about retention, in the sorts of emphasis they give to their retention efforts, and in the ends to which they direct their energies. These commonalities, or what I call here the principles of effective retention, can be described as an emphasis upon the communal dimensions of institutional life, an enduring commitment to student welfare and a broader commitment to the education, not mere retention, of all students.

### Colleges as Social and Intellectual Communities

One of the common features of effective retention programs, indeed of institutions with high rates of student retention generally, is their emphasis upon the communal nature of institutional life. Effective programs commonly stress the manner in which their actions serve to integrate individuals into the mainstream of the social and intellectual life of the institution and into the communities of people which make up that life. They consciously reach out and make contact with students in order to establish personal bonds among students and between students, faculty and staff members of the institution. In this manner effective retention programs not only provide continuing assistance to students, they also act to ensure the integration of all individuals as equal and competent members of the institution.

Particularly important is the continuing emphasis upon frequent and rewarding contact between faculty, staff and students in a variety of settings outside the formal confines of the classrooms and laboratories of institutional life. The use of faculty and peer mentor programs, frequent informal meetings and activities all serve to heighten the degree and range of interaction among members of the community. The stress here is on what happens to students outside the formal academic boundaries of the institution. The research in this regard is quite

clear, namely that the frequency and perceived worth of interaction with faculty outside the classroom is the single strongest predictor of student voluntary departure.

This is not to say that classroom activities do not matter. Of course they do. They play an especially important role not only in student learning but also in the development of patterns of student-faculty contact beyond the classroom. This is the case because faculty classroom behavior serves to notify students of the availablity of faculty for further contact outside the classroom. But it is that availability, the occurrence of contact, not its mere promise, that seems to underlie student retention.

Institutional Commitment to Students

A second common feature of effective retention programs is their enduring commitment to the students they serve. Rather than reflect only institutional interests, they continually ask of themselves hov their actions serve to further the welfare of the students. Like healthy and caring communities generally, effective retention programs direct their energies to helping students further their own needs and interests.

There is no programmatic substitute for this sort of commitment, no easy way to measure its occurrence. It is not the sole province of specific program actions or of designated program staff but is the responsibility of all members of the institution, faculty and staff alike. As such it is reflected in the daily activities of all program members and in the choices they make as to the goals to which they direct their energies. The presence of a strong commitment to students results in an identifiable ethos of caring which permeates the character of institutional life. Student-centered institutions are, in their everyday life, tangibly different from those institutions which place student welfare second to other goals.

It is in this very important sense that institutions of higher education are like other human communities. The essential character of such communities lies not in their formal structures, but in the underlying values which inspire their construction. The ability of an institution to retain students lies less in the formal programs they devise than in the underlying orientation toward students which direct their activities. Communities, educational or otherwise, which care for and reach out to its members and which are committed to their welfare, are also those which keep and nourish its members. Their commitment to students generates a commitment on the part of the student to the institution. Again, that commitment is the basis of student persistence.

Educational Commitment

The secret of effective programs lies however in the observable fact that their commitment to students goes beyond the concern for retention per se to that of the education of student. The social and intellectual growth of students, not their mere retention, is the mark of effective retention efforts. Here I suggest lies the key to successful retention programs, namely that they do not focus on the goal of retention per se but on the broader goals of educating students.

Institutions of higher education are first and foremost educational communities. Their commitment to students springs from a broader commitment to the educational goals of higher education, namely that persons be educated, not merely retained until degree completion. The education of students -- their social and intellectual development -- is the proper goal of institutional action. A commitment to that goal is the turnkey about which successful retention programs are built.

The obligation of institutions to educate the students they admit, springs from a more fundamental obligation of higher education generally. It derives the social contract higher education has to serve the welfare of society by educating its members and thereby help ensure its preservation over time. In many respects it is a obligation not very different from that which Durkheim, the notable 19th century French sociologist, described in his essay on Moral Education. It is a requirement to educate individuals which takes on the character of a moral imperative, one that demands institutions to concern themselves with the educational welfare of the individuals they admit.

That commitment need not be narrowly defined or taken to be the sole province of a particular segment of the higher educational enterprise. The commitment to education is as important to two-year, open enrollment colleges as it is to the elite liberal arts colleges. The concern for student growth is no less important to the former group of institutions as it is to the latter. Nevertheless, the character of that concern, the particular commitment which inspires it, may vary considerably from institution to institution. Though all institutions share in a commitment to the education of their students, it does not follow that the character of that commitment need be the same. Quite the contrary. It must reflect the unique educational mission of the institution.

It is for this reason that I argue that the proper beginning point of institution retention efforts is not the design of such programs, but the posing and answering the question "What is the educational problem for which the institution is the proposed solution?" It is only in answering that question that institutions are able to decide for which types of persons can it be said that their staying is both in their interests and in that of the institution.

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Institutional Commitment and Educational Choice

That mission and the commitment it inspires brings with it a series of difficult choices. In moving toward a policy on student retention, institutions must first decide the character of their educational mission. More often than not, that will require an institution to recognize that it cannot hope or even wish to serve all students who apply or enter its doors or that it should serve those students in the same way as do other institutions. A research university, for instance, should not have the same sort of commitment to its students as does a liberal arts college. Institutions must be selective in their goals and discriminating, but not discriminatory, in the manner in which they seek to attain those goals. While it is incumbent upon an institution to be committed to the education of all its students, it does not follow that it should not be discriminating in its judgments about how that education should be constituted.

What this requires of institutions, for instance, is that they be clear and forthcoming in their statement of educational mission. It calls for a new way of thinking about the character of admissions and its role in the process of student retention, one that puts admissions at the very core of institutional efforts to educate and retain the individuals they recruit. Prospective students should be clearly informed of the character of the education they will receive, of the nature of institutional commitment and the obligation the institution accepts in admitting individuals to the communities of the college. At the same time, institutions must be equally forthcoming about the character of obligations the students take on in accepting admission to the institution and of the educational standards which will mark institutional life. The social and educational contract students and institution strike upon entry should be clearly specified. It should not be left for students to uncover after entry.

Institutions, however, must be careful to avoid being discriminatory in how those standards are constructed or applied to the everyday tasks of educating students. On one hand, it is sometimes the case that educational standards may inadvertently serve to restrict the educational growth of differing students. Excessively narrow definitions of education, for instance, may drive out students whose learning needs and orientations differ from that view. In this sense institutional views of the character of education and of the requisite attributes of student entrants may be discriminatory in nature. On the other hand, it may also be the case that in applying those standards, institutions may unintentionally constrict the likelihood that some persons can successfully complete their educational programs. In this sense institutional actions may serve to constrain, rather than enhance, the educational growth of some of its students.

There is a fine line to be walked by institutions as they seek to navigate between these two poles of educational action. Though the character of higher education induces them to be selective in their mission and discriminating in their educational judgments, they must avoid being discriminatory in their views and in the manner in which they apply their judgments to the daily task of educating students. An institutional commitment to the education, not merely the retention, of its students requires that they do so.

## THE PARADOX OF INSTITUTIONAL COMMITMENT AND THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL ACTION

This latter observation leads us to more carefully consider what might be termed the "paradox of institutional commitment". This paradox may be stated in the following manner, namely that institutions that are willing to encourage students to leave are also those that are more likely to have students who will stay.

In being committed to student welfare and in seeking to serve the goal of their social and intellectual development, institutions may find themselves in the seemingly paradoxical situation of having to do so by encouraging some persons to leave rather than stay. Institutional commitment to students requires, among other things, that the institution concern itself with the welfare of each and every student in ways which go beyond the formal boundaries of the institution to the broader question of what actions are in the best interests of each student. When faced with individuals whose needs and interests cannot be adequately served, the institution must be equally prepared to help individuals go elsewhere as it is to encourage them to stay.

The paradox of institution commitment is quite easily resolved if it is understood that the object of retention is not merely that persons stay but that they may be further educated. Institutional commitment to the social and intellectual development of students necessarily requires a similar commitment to the educative ends of higher education, however and wherever they are expressed.

Rightly understood, the paradox of institutional can be seen to hold the key to effective institutional action for student retention. Those institutions which are committed to the education of its students and therefore willing to tell students when it is in their interests to leave, are also those institutions that are more likely to have students who are committed to the institution. As a consequence, they will also retain more of their students to degree completion. Furthermore those institutions that are so committed to its students will very likely also be those that will fare better in the more limited academic marketplace of the future. For it is to those institutions, two or four-year, that

bright, interested and committed students will seek entry.

## THE LIMITS OF INSTITUTIONAL ACTION

Thus we come to the recognition that there are necessary and perhaps unavoidable limits to institutional actions for student retention. There is only so much institutions can or should do to retain all its students. This does not mean that each and every student does not deserve the same attention and concern regarding his/her education. Quite the contrary. Rather it means that in the normal diversity of students entering most institutions that it is unavoidable that institutions will find themselves in the position of eventually encouraging some students to leave while urging others to stay. Such limits go beyond the widely recognized fact that not all students who enter the institution have the ability, skills, intention and/or commitment to complete their degree programs. They are reflective, if you will, of the very character of the higher educational enterprise rightly understood and of the complexity of behaviors which give rise to student departure.

### What Should One Expect of Retention Efforts?

If there are limits to what one can do to retain students, then what is the extent of those limits? In practical terms, what should institutions expect from their investment in retention efforts? What gains in student retention should they take as indicative of success?

In responding to these questions it must be noted that gains in retention are necessarily a function of what one has already done on behalf of students. For those very few institutions which have given virtually no attention to their students and which have very low rates of retention ( the national average for four-year institutions is about 45 percent) almost any action will yield some significant gain in retention. On the other end of the spectrum, for those institutions which already have done much for their students and which already have high rates of retention, the marginal gain in retention resulting from new efforts may be quite small.

For most institutions, however, experience tells us that the expected range of gains in rates of student retention is between 10 and 20 percent of the entering student body. Gains smaller than ten percent are normally seen as less than satisfactory, whereas gains much larger than twenty percent are typically seen as extraordinary in character.

Those gains may underestimate, however, the long-term gains arising

from effective retention programs. This is the case because of the way in which retention efforts may, over the long-run, enhance enrollments by attracting more students to the institution, students who might not have otherwise applied. Thus I would argue that the long-term gains in both enrollment and retention which accrue from retention efforts are likely to be somewhat greater than the 10 to 20 percent range noted earlier.

But even in the middle range, that is between 10 and 20 percent improvement in rates of student retention, the financial benefits from those sorts of gains can be substantial. Indeed among those many tuition driven institutions who admit virtually everyone who applies, they can spell the difference between survival and closure. In the increasingly competitive marketplace of the future, improving retention may be one of the only viable choice left for most institutions of higher education.

## THE QUESTION OF CHOICE: WHERE DOES ONE INVEST RESOURCES ON BEHALF OF STUDENT RETENTION?

Given what one might expect from retention efforts, the practical question remains as to where and in what form should one invest scarce institutional resources in order to maximize gains in retention efforts? Here the evidence is quite clear. The earlier one addresses the problem of student departure, the greater the likely returns. Specifically, I would advise institutions to concentrate their efforts on admissions, early educational assesment and mandated academic assistance, orientations, and on those programs which focus on the first year of student life on campus, especially but not just the first six weeks of the academic year.

As regards admissions and early educational assessment, institutions would be best served by carefully integrating admissions to other institutional services, especially those involving career counselling and academic advising. The essential feature of effective admissions programs is not merely that they attract people, but that they help prospective students make informed decisions in choosing which college or university they will attend. Furthermore, by compiling information about the educational needs and interests of new students, admissions offices can be helpful in improving institutional assessment programs, early-warning systems, and orientation programs for entering students.

Given such assessment, institutions should mandate course placement and academic assistance. Each entering student should be provided with the opportunity to acquire the academic skills needed to prosper and learn while in college. Where possible, that assistance should be integrated with, rather than segregated from, ongoing freshmen year courses. That is to say, it should be so organized as to enable students to make some progress toward degree completion during their first year of

college. Institutions should avoid the situation where assistance is so structured so as to preclude any form of credit coursework during the first year of college.

Orientation programs and all first year programs which follow orientation should direct their energies not only to counselling and advising but also to the important task of community building. They should center their attention on helping individuals make the often difficult transition to college and on the important process by which students establish competent membership in the social and intellectual communities of the college. For that reason, orientation programs and first year programs generally should contain, where possible, some form of faculty and/or peer mentoring.

Last, but by no means least, institutions should invest their energies to enhance the education of their students. Attention should be paid not only to the character of student classroom experiences, but also to those learning experiences which take place outside the formal domains of academic life. Institutions must become committed to and involved in their students' learning if they wish their students to become involved in their own learning. Understandably, this calls for faculty to play a central role in institutional retention efforts. Their actions are the cornerstone of effective retention programs.

It is for these reasons that institutions should give serious consideration to the establishment of a freshmen year academic program which is tailored to the educational needs of new students. Rather than reorganize existing courses, institutions should construct new courses by asking of themselves what sorts of educational experiences beginning students require in order to be fully educated in college.

## CONCLUDING COMMENTS

I would like to conclude with a brief observation as to the nature of successful retention efforts. Specifically I would like to point out that the view I have presented here is by no means a radical or new one. Rather it is one which refers us back to some very important traditions of higher education, namely that it is at its core concerned with the fostering of communities of persons whose work it is to ensure the social and intellectual development of its members, in particular its student members.

Seen in this fashion, the secret of successful retention programs is no secret at all, but a reaffirmation of some of the important foundations of higher education. There is no great secret to successful retention programs, no mystery which requires unravelling. Though successful retention programming does require some skill and not an inconsiderable amount of effort, it does not require sophisicated machinery. It is within the reach of all institutions if they only give serious attention to the character of their educational mission and the obligations it entails.

It is here that I conclude my comments, with the notion that successful retention is no more than, but certainly no less than, successful education.



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